Kern County Education Workforce Housing Feasibility Pilot

District-Owned Land Model — Version 2

Working Concept

The Kern County Education Workforce Housing Feasibility Pilot proposes exploring whether one or more Kern County local educational agencies (LEAs) can use district- or county-office-owned land to support below-market rental housing for education employees.

The proposed model treats housing affordability as a workforce recruitment and retention issue and as a complement—not an alternative—to competitive employee compensation. Rather than providing a temporary monthly rental subsidy, Version 2 explores whether an LEA can leverage an existing public asset to create a longer-term housing resource while retaining ownership of the underlying land.

This proposal is a **feasibility framework**. Unit count, site selection, employee eligibility, affordability levels, financing, developer structure, community benefits, and project scale would be determined through local needs assessment, property analysis, employee engagement, financial feasibility, and public review.

Purpose

The purpose of the pilot is to determine whether education workforce housing on LEA-owned land could provide a viable workforce-stability strategy for Kern County school districts and county education partners.

The project would examine whether locally appropriate education workforce housing could help recruit employees, improve retention, reduce employee housing-cost burdens and long commutes, strengthen connections between educators and the communities they serve, and make productive long-term use of underutilized public educational property.

California research identifies housing affordability and school staffing as interconnected challenges and finds that LEA-owned land offers a potential resource for addressing them. A statewide analysis identified potentially developable LEA-owned property in every California county and emphasized that individual properties require careful local assessment before development decisions are made.

The Workforce Problem

Education workforce housing begins with an education problem rather than a real-estate issue.

California research has documented that housing costs can make it difficult for teachers and other school employees to live near their workplaces and can contribute to recruitment and retention challenges. Recent research examining nine completed or nearly completed California education workforce housing developments found that tenants reported housing availability influenced decisions to join or remain with their LEA.



Version 2 therefore preserves the central premise of the original Kern County proposal: housing assistance should be evaluated according to its effect on workforce stability, educational continuity, and employee well-being..

Kern-specific recruitment, retention, vacancy, salary, commuting, and employee housing-cost data must still be collected before determining the magnitude or characteristics of local need.

Local validation needed: participating LEA vacancy data, employee turnover and retention data, hard-to-fill classifications, employee salaries, housing costs, commute patterns, and employee interest in workforce housing.

Why Kern County

Kern County offers an opportunity to examine education workforce housing in a region that differs significantly from many of California's established coastal EWH projects.

The county includes large urban school systems as well as smaller suburban and rural educational agencies. This creates the possibility of evaluating whether California's evolving education workforce housing framework can be adapted to communities with different land values, housing markets, development economics, staffing challenges, and organizational capacity.

Preliminary review has also identified Kern educational properties that appear to contain undeveloped or potentially underutilized land. That observation should be treated only as a starting point. No parcel should be considered available for housing until the owning LEA determines its current and future educational needs and completes formal site and feasibility analysis.

Proposed Development Model

Under the model proposed for study, a participating LEA would retain ownership of an appropriate property and make the site available for education workforce housing through a long-term ground lease or comparable development arrangement.

An experienced housing developer or development partnership would finance, construct, and operate the residential development under terms negotiated with the LEA. Property-management responsibilities should ordinarily be assigned to an experienced independent operator rather than school administrators, preserving an appropriate separation between the employee's workplace and day-to-day housing management.

The LEA would establish the public and educational goals of the project and retain control over matters permitted under the applicable development agreement, including employee eligibility, affordability goals, project design requirements, educational or community uses, and long-term stewardship of the site.

This approach allows the LEA to preserve ownership of an appreciating public asset rather than permanently selling it while potentially receiving ground-rent or other negotiated financial benefits over the life of the agreement.

Affordability and Employee Eligibility

Affordability should be established during feasibility analysis rather than fixed in advance.

A common housing-affordability benchmark is housing costing no more than approximately 30 percent of gross household income. Education workforce housing is particularly relevant to moderate-income public employees who may earn too much to qualify for traditional subsidized housing while still struggling to afford market-rate housing.

A Kern project should examine both income-based affordability and the relationship between proposed EWH rents and prevailing local market rents.

Eligibility should likewise be developed with employee and labor input. Version 2 broadens the original proposal to include certificated and classified employees, with priority rules based on demonstrated workforce needs, income, recruitment difficulty, employment status, or other locally determined criteria.

The feasibility process should specifically determine whether priority should be given to early-career employees, hard-to-fill classifications, relocating employees, lower-income staff, or other groups. Any final eligibility rules must comply with applicable state and federal housing requirements.

Lessons from San Diego Unified

San Diego Unified School District provides a useful California reference model, but not a template Kern County should simply duplicate.

As of January 2026, San Diego Unified reported nearly 3,000 affordable educator housing units in its development pipeline across six sites, with an overall goal of creating housing opportunities for up to 10 percent of district staff. Proposed projects include different affordability ranges, community

amenities, childcare facilities, gardens and other district or community benefits.

The district has also used Joint Occupancy as part of its development strategy. In March 2025, San Diego Unified formally identified multiple district sites for potential affordable workforce housing and began seeking Joint Occupancy development proposals while conducting community listening sessions.

One San Diego proposal illustrates the potential ground-lease structure particularly clearly: the district reported estimated annual ground-rent revenue under a proposed 99-year agreement while retaining ownership of the property, with no district construction funding required for that project.

The lesson for Kern County is not that Kern should necessarily replicate San Diego's project scale. It’s that LEA-owned land, predictable employee demand, an experienced developer, streamlined approval pathways, and long-term public ownership can be combined into a model in which the school district does not have to become a traditional housing developer.

California Policy Environment

California policy has increasingly supported the use of educational land for workforce housing.

The 2025 research on completed EWH developments notes that earlier legislation including the Teacher Housing Act and AB 2295 expanded LEA authority and streamlined portions of the development process. The same research also identifies financing moderate-income housing as a continuing challenge because many traditional affordable-housing programs target households earning less than many certificated employees.

AB 1021, signed in October 2025, further expanded California's education workforce housing framework. According to UCLA cityLAB, the legislation builds on AB 2295 by expanding eligible properties, including opportunities relevant to smaller and rural districts; protecting greater allowable density and building height; further expediting development; adding a CEQA exemption; and revising affordability requirements. Any Kern proposal should receive project-specific legal review before relying on a particular statutory pathway.

The California Department of Education has also indicated that additional state technical-assistance infrastructure is being developed through the California Department of Housing and Community Development. Kern partners should monitor those resources as the feasibility effort progresses.

Phase I — Preliminary Exploration and Local Validation

The first stage should establish whether a genuine workforce-housing problem exists for a participating Kern LEA and whether education workforce housing is an appropriate response.

This stage should include an employee housing-needs survey; analysis of recruitment, vacancy and retention data; review of salaries relative to local housing costs; identification of hard-to-fill positions; and discussions with employee groups, administrators, governing-board members, housing organizations and community stakeholders.

At the same time, the participating LEA should inventory its real-estate holdings and identify properties that may warrant further study. Initial screening should consider future educational needs, parcel size and configuration, existing use, infrastructure, location relative to schools and employment centers, surrounding neighborhood conditions, transportation access, and potential community impact.

The statewide research emphasizes that predevelopment is especially important because decisions about site, design, tenancy, financing and community engagement are made during this stage. LEAs are also encouraged to involve their communities early, maintain transparency around site selection, and use experienced housing professionals because school agencies typically do not possess internal housing-development expertise.

Completion of Phase I should produce a **go/no-go recommendation for formal feasibility analysis**.

Phase II — Formal Feasibility and Project Definition

If Phase I identifies both demonstrated employee need and one or more plausible sites, the participating LEA should engage qualified

housing-development, financial, legal and planning expertise to conduct a formal feasibility study.

That study should evaluate potential unit count and mix, construction type, site design, infrastructure, affordability targets, expected rents, development and operating costs, financing options, land-use pathway, community benefits, project ownership and ground-lease structure, property management, employee eligibility, and long-term financial sustainability.

Multiple scenarios should be considered rather than assuming that the maximum number of units is automatically the preferred outcome.

California's experience demonstrates that development is a lengthy process. The 2025 review of nine EWH developments found an average period of approximately 7.5 years from concept to occupancy and emphasized the importance of early stakeholder engagement, durable project champions and a strong development team.

Accordingly, the success of the Kern feasibility pilot should not depend upon reaching construction within a predetermined short timeline.

Phase III — Developer and Community Partnership

If formal feasibility supports development, the LEA could initiate a competitive process to identify an experienced development partner.

The partnership should clearly assign responsibilities for financing, construction, regulatory compliance, property management, maintenance, resident services and long-term asset management. The district's role should remain centered on its educational mission, land stewardship, workforce objectives and oversight of the negotiated agreement.

Community engagement should continue before and throughout developer selection and project design. Potential neighborhood concerns—including traffic, density, school-site impacts, public space, historic resources, property values, safety and infrastructure—should be addressed transparently rather than treated as obstacles to be managed after a project is announced.

Where appropriate, the project could incorporate educational or community-serving uses through Joint Occupancy or other structures. Potential features could include childcare, educational facilities, parks,

community rooms, gardens, recreation areas, sustainability measures, or other amenities identified through local engagement. These should emerge from the needs of the specific site and community rather than being prescribed in advance.

Potential Kern County Partners

The project should be led by a participating school district or county office of education rather than by an outside advocacy organization.

Potential supporting partners include Kern County school districts; Kern County Superintendent of Schools; the Housing Authority of the County of Kern; California Department of Education; California Department of Housing and Community Development; California School Boards Association; local governments and planning agencies; experienced affordable- and workforce-housing developers; labor representatives; financial and legal advisers; community organizations; and local higher-education institutions.

Universities and colleges may also provide research capacity. Potential partnerships with institutions such as California State University, Bakersfield, Bakersfield College, or other regional colleges could support employee surveys, housing-market analysis, economic-impact research, project evaluation, or student research opportunities. Such partnerships would supplement—not replace—professional feasibility, legal, financial and development expertise.

Financing Approach

Version 2 intentionally does not prescribe a single funding source.

The development financing strategy should be established through formal feasibility analysis and may combine multiple public, private and LEA-related mechanisms depending on employee income levels, project structure and available programs.

A separate challenge exists at the earliest stage: **predevelopment funding**. Districts may need resources for employee surveys, property analysis, consultants, legal review, financial modeling and feasibility studies before they can determine whether a housing project is viable. The CDE

discussion identified access to housing expertise and upfront predevelopment resources as significant barriers for interested districts.

Securing technical assistance or predevelopment support should therefore be an early project priority.

Pilot Evaluation

Because Version 2 is a feasibility pilot, its first measures of success should evaluate decision quality and readiness rather than construction alone.

The initial project should determine whether a participating LEA can document an employee housing need, identify at least one potentially viable property, establish meaningful employee and community participation, identify a legally and financially plausible development structure, attract qualified housing-development interest, establish an affordability strategy, and reach an informed governing-board decision about whether to proceed.

If housing is ultimately developed, longer-term evaluation should examine employee housing-cost burden, recruitment outcomes, retention, vacancies in high-need classifications, employee satisfaction, commute patterns, resident satisfaction, financial performance, community impact, and any relationship between workforce stability and school continuity.

Evaluation should acknowledge that educator retention has multiple causes. Housing should therefore be assessed as one workforce intervention rather than treated as the sole explanation for changes in staffing outcomes.

Risks and Questions Requiring Local Study

The feasibility process must test the proposal rather than attempt to justify a predetermined outcome.

Major questions include whether Kern educators experience sufficient housing pressure to support EWH; whether appropriate LEA land exists; whether housing is the best long-term use of a potential site; whether projected rents can be meaningfully below market while supporting development costs; whether sufficient employee demand exists; how scarce units should be allocated; whether employees would view district-affiliated housing positively; whether communities would support individual sites;

what financing is available for moderate-income housing; and how the project would remain financially and physically sustainable over several decades.

A finding that a particular site or district is not appropriate for EWH should be considered a useful feasibility outcome rather than a project failure.

Proposed Immediate Next Steps

The next phase should identify one or more Kern educational agencies willing to participate in an exploratory conversation; share the updated district-owned-land model with existing Kern education and housing contacts; determine what workforce, salary, retention and property data participating LEAs can provide; consult with the Housing Authority of the County of Kern regarding local development feasibility and developer conditions; explore CSBA technical assistance available through a participating member agency; identify available state predevelopment and technical-assistance resources; and develop a preliminary employee housing-needs survey and LEA property-screening framework.

Results from those conversations should then be shared with CDE's Educator Housing Workgroup so state partners can understand the opportunities and barriers emerging in Kern County and identify where additional technical assistance may be useful.

Conclusion

Version 2 reframes the Kern County Educator Housing Pilot from a proposed rental-subsidy program into an evidence-based exploration of **education workforce housing as long-term public infrastructure**.

The model preserves the original project's central objective: improving educator recruitment, retention and workforce stability by reducing housing pressure. It changes the mechanism by asking whether Kern educational agencies can leverage land they already own, partner with experienced housing developers, retain long-term public control of that land, and create high-quality housing that remains affordable to members of the education workforce.

California's growing body of EWH research and development experience means Kern County would not have to invent this approach from scratch. At the same time, Kern's urban, suburban and rural conditions require a locally designed solution.

The purpose of the feasibility pilot is to determine, with evidence and community participation, **whether it should be built in Kern County, where it could work, whom it should serve, and what partnership would make it sustainable.**